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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KINSHASA 000744

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SUBJECT: 200 CHILD SOLDIERS REMAIN IN MIXED BRIGADES

REF: KINSHASA 319

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11. (SBU) Summary: UN child protection officials and the NGO Caritas have demobilized 251 child soldiers from the Congolese military's (FARDC) six "mixed" brigades in North Kivu but estimate that another 200 remain in their ranks. End summary.

BACKGROUND

12. (SBU) UN child protection officials in Goma estimate some 200 children remain in the six "mixed" FARDC brigades. The "mixage" process which began in North Kivu in January 2007 combined troops loyal to renegade General Laurent Nkunda with pro-government soldiers into six "mixed" brigades. When the Alpha, Bravo and Charlie brigades were "mixed," MONUC child protection officers discreetly drew up a list of identified child soldiers. In March they received authorization from FARDC General Ngizo in Goma to remove child soldiers immediately at the beginning of the mixage process of the remaining brigades, and a handover date from March 31 to April 6 was scheduled to remove child soldiers from the already mixed brigades.

13. (SBU) Many military commanders were uncooperative during the handover period and the March mixage process, therefore MONUC and NGO child protection officers continue efforts to demobilize child soldiers. MONUC and the NGO Caritas had separated 251 of an estimated 450 child soldiers from the six "mixed" brigades by mid-June (154 by MONUC and 97 by Caritas):

Alpha Brigade -- 68 released (85 originally identified)
Bravo Brigade -- 6 released (42 originally identified)
Charlie Brigade -- 15 released (90 originally identified)
Delta Brigade -- 79 released
Echo Brigade -- 38 released
Foxtrot Brigade -- 31 released
Other Nkunda-loyal units -- 14 released

COOPERATION: A MIXED RECORD

14. (C) Cooperation by brigade commanders varied. UNICEF advisor Pernille Ironside told PolIntern that many commanders were uncooperative in releasing children under their command. MONUC child protection officer Claudia Seymour cited Delta Commander Colonel Faustin, Charlie Deputy Commander Colonel Baudoin, and Bosco Ntaganda (the former Ituri militia leader now working with Nkunda). She claimed Bravo Commander Colonel

Makenga Sultani and Lt. Colonel Mulomba, continue to recruit child soldiers forcibly. All were officers in pro-Nkunda units before mixage began.

15. (C) Ironside said that commanders gave her a range of excuses for not turning over child soldiers. She said they opposed "external oversight" and argued that "mixage" should be as secretive as possible. Others denied that the soldiers involved were under 18, even in cases where child protection officials had clearly identified them as minors. She said commanders also claimed they needed to retain the child soldiers to protect their ethnic group.

16. (C) Ironside said pro-government military commanders tended to cooperate more with UN officials. Seymour noted positive actions of Colonel Mosala, Colonel Yav and Colonel Padiri, all of whom served in pro-government units before "mixage."

POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

17. (C) Seymour claimed cooperation by some commanders increased after the April 19 release of a Human Rights Watch report that criticized the "mixage" process and charged some local commanders with continued recruitment of child soldiers. Juvenal Munubo of Caritas-Goma said some commanders were more willing to release child soldiers after attending a series of seminars on children's rights it had sponsored. Ironside stated that local attitudes towards child soldiering is not entirely negative, as the population does not consider their employment a serious crime.

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18. (C) Seymour and Ironside said they were encouraged by the recent appointment of General Vainqueur Mayala as the FARDC Regional Military Commander for North Kivu and were hopeful of new initiatives from him. Both said Mayala has signaled his interest in resolving the child soldier issue, and that during his previous assignment as Ituri Operations Commander, he had worked closely with UN child protection officials there.

WHO THE CHILD SOLDIERS ARE AND WHY THEY JOIN

19. (C) Of the 154 released child soldiers officially registered by MONUC, 19 are alleged to be Rwandan. Sixteen of these claimed to have been recruited by agents of Nkunda in the DRC. Eleven others are allegedly Congolese nationals who were recruited in refugee camps in Rwanda. Seymour said most children removed from units loyal to Nkunda were ethnic Tutsis although this group constitutes a minority among all child soldiers identified in the "mixed" brigades. In fact, she said there was no dominant ethnicity among them.

110. (C) Seymour noted that over half the children registered by MONUC Child Protection had escaped on their own. Some of them claimed they had been abducted or told they had to join "to defend their tribe." Other child soldiers said they joined voluntarily because their families were too poor to feed them and they had no educational opportunities. Ironside asserted that when child soldiers joined "voluntarily" it was out of desperation, and at times at the encouragement of their parents. Seymour added that in some rare cases -- roughly one out of every 20 -- child soldiers expressed a desire to stay in their units.

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LACK OF REINSERTION PROGRAMS AND GDRC FOLLOW UP

111. (C) Seymour said she was frustrated that the GDRC has not

helped demobilize child soldiers or prosecute violators. She claimed that this has emboldened some commanders. She said many do not fear punishment for using child soldiers. She stated that "naming and shaming" was the only real weapon left to convince them to cooperate.

¶12. (SBU) Seymour and Ironside said they feared demobilized child soldiers may rejoin military units because of lack of money or educational opportunities. Ironside explained as well that demobilized child soldiers are at times targets for harassment by security officials, and may be arrested on charges of desertion. She said UNICEF is working to provide demobilized children documents attesting to their status.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) Changes in military commanders' attitudes as a result of political pressure and educational programming have been effective in releasing child soldiers. To end child soldiering, it is important to focus on reinsertion and educational opportunities for children in order to stop the cycle of recruitment and re-recruitment. It is unclear if General Mayala's interest in children's rights can overcome the GDRC's fundamental inability to control armed groups in the Kivus and their recruitment of child soldiers. End comment.
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